

Man of Sorrows: Suffering and Sovereignty

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Job 38:1-3, 16-18, 22-27; Job 39:9-12, 19-25

You can't do a sermon series on suffering without doing a sermon on the story of Job. Perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, Job is a book about suffering. In a minute I will read part of the end of the book of Job, but to make sense of that, to hear the Holy Spirit speak through what I read, you need to know the whole story. I think most of you do, but just to refresh all our memory, let me recap.

Job is a good man living a prosperous life. He loves God and follows him. God is pleased with Job. But one day Satan, the accuser, comes into the presence of God and, cynic that he is, he says to God, "Phooey on Job! Job only follows you because you've given him a good life. Let me take away his wealth and he'll curse you." So God lets Satan take away first his wealth and his family, then his health, and Job ends up covered in sores and sitting on an ash heap. For the next thirty chapters, Job cries out to God in pain. He says that his suffering is unfair. He questions God's goodness. His desperate words have become a touchstone for generations of men and women overwhelmed by suffering that seems senseless.

While he is on the ash heap, Job is visited by three friends with a neat and tidy theology which they try to overlay on Job's suffering. They say, 'You must, somehow, be responsible for this disaster.' They tell Job off for saying all those harsh things about God. Eventually, in chapter 38, God shows up to answer Job's complaint and he does two things. He tells the friends that they were wrong for rebuking Job. He says that Job spoke correctly. He also speaks to Job. He speaks to Job out of a whirlwind. Surrounded by the swirl and storm, he responds to Job's lament. Here is just some of what he says: Read Job 38:1-3, 16-18, 22-27, 39:9-12, 19-25

As you can imagine I've been reading about suffering and thinking about suffering a lot during this series. And as part of my reading I came across an article by a professor at Palm Beach Atlantic University, a man named Samuel Joeckel. In his work at the University, Dr. Joeckel teaches a course on C.S. Lewis and in his course he always teaches Lewis's two books on suffering: *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed*. C.S. Lewis thought a lot about suffering and his faith. So much so that he wrote, not one, but two books on the subject. The two books are very different, and different in an interesting way. The first book he wrote was *The Problem of Pain*. He wrote it in 1940 when he was a relatively young man. That book is more of a philosophical reflection on pain. It's what theologians call a theodicy; a theodicy is a theological defense of God's goodness in the face of evil. A theodicy is a rational argument. 'Yes, there is evil in this world. But here are four reasons why God might allow evil. And here are three reasons why we can still be confident of God's goodness in the face of evil.' It's a rational, philosophical approach to the problem.

Lewis' second book on suffering was *A Grief Observed*. I quoted that book last week. That book was written 20 years later, towards the end of Lewis' life. Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed* after the suffering and death of his wife, Joy. It's a very different book. It's not a theodicy; it's a memoir. Lewis gives an account of how he feels from day to day as he mourns his wife. He tries to tell you what it feels like to live as a Christian in the middle of loss. If you remember my quote from last week, it's a raw book. It's not a book of explanation; it's a story of personal pain. Lewis questions his faith. He howls at God. Eventually he comes to terms, but it's a harrowing journey.

So every year in his class Dr. Joeckel teaches both these books – the memoir and the theodicy. And at the end of the semester he holds up both books and he asks his class, "If you were in crisis and suffering, which of these two books would give you more comfort? Which of these two books would you give to a friend who was suffering and going through a crisis?" *The Problem of Pain* and its explanations? Or *A Grief Observed* with its raw pain? Guess which they choose? They choose *A Grief Observed* every time. They choose the raw pain. They choose the story.

Our suffering wants a story. Our suffering needs a story. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against theodicy. The Bible has theodicy in it. There are Bible passages that suggest reasons for suffering. Good theodicy is important. I've done some theodicy in these sermons already and we will do more before the series is over.

But our suffering wants a story. And that's what the Bible gives us. The Bible does theodicy, but for the most part, the Bible's answer to our suffering is stories.

And for our suffering, the Bible has two important stories to tell us. They aren't separate stories; they are all part of the same story of God. Both these stories culminate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Both these stories are communicated to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Both these stories are important for dealing with our suffering. We need both of them to find comfort and hope. These two stories are the story of the suffering of God, and the story of the sovereignty of God. For your suffering, for my suffering, the Bible tells us the story of the suffering God and the sovereign God.

The story of the Suffering God was last week's sermon. Last week I showed you those portraits, those Biblical portraits, of God in pain. The Father lamenting over his son in Hosea 11. Jesus weeping over Jerusalem in Luke 19. The Holy Spirit groaning with us in our pain and bringing our pains to the heart of the Father. And then ultimately, the Man of Sorrows carrying the pain of the whole world on the cross.

The book of Job is more about the story of sovereignty. After thirty chapters of spilling out his complaint, after 30 chapters of accusation and lament, God shows up and responds to Job. You heard me read a portion of God's response. Does God show Job his suffering face in his response? Does God reveal his pain to Job? No, what we just read was a proclamation of power and might. God shows Job his sovereignty.

Let's look more closely at the Lord's response. At first hearing God's reply can sound harsh. It sounds like God is simply putting Job in his place, slapping him down: "I am God, you are a creature. Don't forget it!!" That's a criticism some secular scholars have had. They say, 'Job is in pain and God just steamrolls him!' But this isn't entirely fair, because when you read carefully I think you can see things in the answer that do address Job's concerns, that do answer his accusations. Specifically, God's answer addresses two of Job's main accusations.

First, in his 30 chapters of complaint, Job accuses God of being unfair and random. He suggests that perhaps God is a God who brings chaos instead of order. God answers that challenge. In his answer, God takes Job on a tour of creation and shows him some of the wonders of the creation. In chapter 38 God shows Job physical wonders; in chapter 39 God shows him animal wonders. But pay attention to the kinds of things God shows Job, because there is kind of a common link between them. All the natural wonders are wild and beyond our power to comprehend. Many of these phenomena have a fearful edge. The seas, the snow and hail, the thunder and lightning, the light and the darkness. These are all powers that can be fearful. They are strange. They can be chaotic. Lions and wild donkeys and wild oxen and the ostrich, the mighty war horse, the high flying eagle, Leviathan the sea monster in the depths of the sea. These are wild creatures. Beyond our power to comprehend.

In his answer, God takes Job for a walk on the wild side. He brings Job where the wild things are. He does this to make a very specific point. 'Job you know all that wild stuff that you can't understand and can't control, that's my stuff! It looks chaotic to you but I am its Lord! I feed the wild ox. I give the war horse his power. I tame the sea serpents. I show the dawn its place. I contain the sea. I am the Lord of the wild things. Job you think your life is wild and out of control. Don't you believe it. I am the Sovereign Lord of your wild life.

Second accusation: Job also accused God of being absent; of not listening to him; of completely abandoning him in his time of need. But God's response makes is pretty clear that he was there the whole time. God heard every word Job spoke on the ash heap. Job may not have realized it, Job may not have had warm fuzzy I-feel-the-presence-of-God feelings, but God was there the whole time.

So...Is God's response a rebuke to Job? In part maybe, but that's not what it is at its heart. God isn't just telling Job off, in this response God is giving Job what he needs. God is saying, "Job! I am here! I have not forsaken you! I am the Lord of the sea and the sky and the stars and I am the Lord of the horses and the sea monsters! Job I am completely just, I am completely in control, and I am completely here."

So the book of Job tells the story of God's sovereignty. It's a story that runs throughout this book. We see it in the first chapter of Genesis where God stands enthroned over the creation and says, it is very good. We see it on the heights of Mount Sinai where he speaks his law and the mountain quakes. We see it at Easter when Jesus walks out of the tomb, and says "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." We will see it at the end of time when Jesus returns in glory, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess, and Christ will make all things new.

The story of God's sovereignty. The story of God's suffering. Those are the two stories for our pain. In our pain, we need both these stories. If all I had was the story of Job, I would be sure of God's power, but I would wonder about his love and care. If all I had was the suffering face of God, I would know that he loved me and felt my pain, but I would wonder if he could help me, if he could save me. But the Bible shows me both the story of God's suffering and the story of his sovereignty, and in Jesus Christ, the story of God's sovereignty and the story of his suffering are woven together in a way that is wonderful beyond my ability to say, in the death and resurrection of Jesus the story of suffering and sovereignty come together, and in his story we are loved and we are saved.

Does God still show up today like he does for Job here? Does God still come into the storm of our lives and speak his sovereignty? Maybe not in quite the same way he did for Job, but he still makes it clear in his own way.

In his book, Tim Keller tells the story of a woman named Andi whose marriage came apart. Her whole life she had prayed for and longed for a good marriage and the companionship that came with it. She had prayed for God to send her the right man and, when she met the man who became her husband, she thought God answered her prayer. But the marriage was never easy and finally it floundered. Her husband left her and eventually pushed through their divorce. Andi was devastated and perplexed. She cried out to God. Why didn't God fix her marriage? Why did the thing she had prayed for and worked for turn into pointless pain?

Finally, one night she was reading the Psalms and she read this verse. "Lord you are strong. Lord you are loving." Psalm 62:11-12. A proclamation of both God's love and his power, his suffering and his sovereignty. She realized that the love and devotion and fulfillment she expected from her husband and from her marriage were only properly found in God. She resolved to give God the first fruits of her love, and as a way to show that, she said, 'I will take off my wedding ring and I will buy a new ring. This ring will be a symbol of my commitment to God. I'll wear that from now on.'

She went to bed that night intending to buy a new ring. The next day she went to a regular prayer group that she attended with some fellow Christian women. She said nothing about her intention to buy a ring; she just prayed with her friends. The prayer time always began with silence. During the silence, Andi noticed one of the women from the circle coming over to her. She was holding out a ring. She whispered to Andi, "I feel like the Lord wants you to have this ring. He wants you to know that you are his beloved."

Do you see what happened there? God came into her storm and spoke of his sovereignty. Andi thought she would get down on one knee and commit herself to God. She thought that she would be the force behind the commitment. But before she could do anything, the God of mercy got down on one knee and proposed to her.

That's an amazing story. Nothing like that has ever happened to me. Nothing like that has ever happened to most of you. But things like that do happen. And when they do, it is God speaking, not just to Andi but to all of us. It is God telling the story of his sovereignty. It is God speaking to us out of the whirlwind of our lives, saying, "I am still here. My purposes still hold. You are still my child."

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